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**Urban wind power and the private sector: Community benefits,  
social acceptance and public engagement**

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Given the ambitious government targets for renewable energy generation in the UK, there has been a push by government and industry towards various types and scales of Renewable Energy Technologies (RETs). This paper will explore the implications of commercial urban wind projects for local communities, drawing on a case study of proposals by ASDA to construct wind turbines in two semi-urban locations in the UK. The paper argues that community responses to the proposals were complex and varied and could not adequately be encapsulated by “nimby” (not in my back yard) designations. It concludes that while ASDA followed a process of consulting local people, this process highlighted the problems of the “business as usual” approach to public engagement employed by ASDA, and assumptions made about public acceptance of RETs.

Key words: renewable energy; commercial urban wind; public engagement; public perceptions; social acceptance

## Introduction

The UK contribution to the December 2008 European Union agreement will require an increase in UK renewable energy production to 15% by 2020. Despite the likely dominance of offshore wind in meeting such commitments, other sources will inevitably feature in the UK's overall renewable energy "portfolio". Onshore wind in rural areas and biomass will probably be dominant, but there will also continue to be a small but nevertheless significant element of urban renewable energy generation. Some of this will be microgeneration at the household level, mainly solar hot water, small scale photovoltaic and wind. There will also be some "meso-level" renewable production through community-level projects (Devine-Wright and Walker, 2008), which will in turn increase the demand for localised grid infrastructure.

Additionally, despite the physical limitations of urban wind turbines, due to the proximity of buildings and geographical constraints, there clearly exists commercial interest in the generation of urban wind power, and as this paper explores, this includes major supermarkets. The paper will focus on the implications of the push for the development of urban wind power by the ASDA supermarket chain for local communities, and will consider this in the context of debates on social acceptance of wind power, and of specific wind energy projects. Private sector developments such as those in the case study which is the focus of this paper provide new insights into public engagement with and social acceptance of Renewable Energy Technologies (RETs) in an urban or semi-urban context. Before turning to the case study, the paper will first review

the literature on public responses to wind power and to wind energy developments.

## **Public engagement and wind power**

### ***The “objection discourse”***

The “objection discourse” on onshore wind farms has suggested that there is a “social gap” between high levels of public support for wind energy generally and the low success rate of planning applications for wind power developments (Toke, 2002; Bell et al, 2005). Such commentary assumes that public opposition to wind power affects the success rate of proposed wind power developments (e.g. Bell et al, 2005: 461). Indeed, Toke (2005) argues that the attitude of people living closest to proposed windfarms is the most important influence on the decisions of local authorities. However, Aitken et al (2008) suggest that local opposition groups’ power over planning outcomes for wind farm developments is very limited, only serving to delay outcomes rather than to actually influence them.

Wolsink (2007) comments that public attitudes toward wind power generally are fundamentally different from those towards specific wind farms, and that this causes misunderstandings about the nature of public support for RETs (also see Eltham et al, 2008). Opposition to RET schemes has in the past been explained as “nimbyism” – “not in my back yard” attitudes. However, feelings about equity and fairness appear to be the determinants of such

motives, rather than selfishness, or indeed ignorance (Barry et al, 2008). According to Wolsink, a lack of success with the implementation of wind turbine schemes may be in part due to poor communication (see also Beddoe and Chamberlin, 2003).

Toke (2003) emphasises the benefits of sensitivity to a local community by the developer and of a more open and proactive dialogue between the wind industry and local communities, whilst Haggett and Toke (2006) cite a number of issues around public acceptance of, and concerns about wind turbine siting and the factors influencing the outcome of applications for wind farms and the emergence of opposition.

### ***Urban wind***

Most of the research undertaken to date on public engagement with and responses to wind power developments has focused upon larger onshore, and mainly rural, wind farm developments. However, Peel and Lloyd (2007) note the relative novelty of planning for wind energy in the urban context, and thus argue for an understanding of the attitudinal, relational and developmental issues involved to help understand the implementation process. They suggest that the parameters of the urban context differ from the rural counterpart, regarding landscape, the relative concentration of population, the mix of uses, and the cumulative impacts of existing developments. In their research on developing wind energy potential in Dundee, they suggest that business and corporate interests should be alert to how the new environmental sensitivity and awareness within their organisation may affect their market position and

operating ethos in the views of their shareholders and customers. Evidence from the Energy Saving Trust (2004) points to the potential offered by smaller-scale wind energy developments.

Osborne Clarke (2005) suggests that securing planning permission for green energy in industrial brownfield sites may be relatively easier than in rural contexts. Ellis et al (2009: 525) comment on “the physics of wind energy resources”, and the subsequent problems posed for the planning process:

... high energy sites tend to be in the landscapes society values the most, often with high cultural significance, important ecological niches and rare “wildness” qualities.

The history of public defence of such valued landscapes from wind power developments makes the context of a proposal for an urban wind turbine unique, since urban landscapes are not considered “valued” in the same way as rural landscapes, either visually or in terms of tranquillity. Wolsink (2007: 1194) describes noise, while “an impact factor that must be treated seriously and adequately”, as “a secondary factor as far as attitudes are concerned”. He refers to research which found only a weak relationship between perceived noise annoyance and actual sound level (Wolsink and Sprengers, 1993; Persson-Waye and Ohrstrom, 2002; Pedersen and Persson-Waye, 2005). Such perceived differences between rural and urban landscapes will affect planning considerations in proposals for wind energy developments in urban locations, and this could include negotiations on community benefits<sup>1</sup>.



### ***Community benefit***

Community benefit is usually interpreted as some kind of immediate tangible asset donated to the local community by a developer, usually formalised through a Section 106 agreement or similar, although it could also include the provision of schools, hospitals, or indeed renewable energy sources. Community Viewfinders (2007: 17) argue that the type of company, their track record of public engagement, and their perceptions of the importance of Public Relations (PR) gains will influence the existence, level and form of community benefits provided. As Cowell et al (2007) note in their report for the Welsh Assembly Government on wind farm development, the form most frequently taken by community benefits is the provision of a fund by the developer to support activities in nearby local communities. The actual amounts paid vary significantly with the upper level being £200,000 per annum. In most instances the funds are administered through a local institution, or a trust set up to specifically manage the funds. Most funds are “reactive”, in response to applications for grants, and some funds spell out what the money may be used for, such as sustainable energy projects. Cowell et al (2007: 31) note that the prospect of community benefits has been “flagged up, in fairly open-ended terms, in pre-application meetings and exhibitions”.

### **The role of supermarkets in the urban wind arena**

In recent years, some of the major supermarkets in the UK - Tesco, Sainsbury's and ASDA - have expressed interest in rolling out wind turbines across both their distribution centres and supermarket stores. These range from smaller scale turbines (15 metres high in a number of cases), to (in only a few instances) turbines up to 125 metres high. According to a newspaper report (Express, 2008), this is perceived by John Constable of the Renewable Energy Foundation as an attempt by supermarkets to improve their environmental credentials. In the newspaper article, Constable also questions whether in the smaller scale cases it is a PR exercise by Tesco, as in reality these smaller turbines would generate "little useful power" (Express, 2008).

It appears that supermarkets believe that introducing wind power as one of a range of environmentally-friendly actions is something which their customers will support, as well as providing efficiency and energy savings for the commercial gain of the supermarkets themselves. The former reason can be termed "Corporate Social Responsibility" (CSR). For example, a spokesman for Tesco described the company's plans to build wind turbines up to 15 metres high at "virtually all" of its 2,000 stores (Express, 2008) as part of the supermarket chain's "community plan", and commented:

The inaudible turbines use the latest technology and are very efficient and will genuinely help meet the energy needs of the store. We hope the majority of customers are excited for it and hope it demonstrates in a clear way our commitment to tackling climate change (BBC news, 2009).

The use of the term “inaudible” is particularly interesting here since, despite the research referred to above which found only a weak relationship between perceived noise annoyance and actual sound level, noise pollution has become a focal point of objections to some wind energy developments. Examples are the proposal for three wind turbines to add to the existing one at the University of Ulster at Coleraine (Against Coleraine Windfarm Action Group), and ASDA’s proposal at Kirkcaldy described below.

Sainsbury’s and Ecotricity are working on a joint planning application to build a single two megawatt wind turbine at their Hams Hall distribution centre near Birmingham (Ecotricity, 2008). This approach fits within a discourse of ecological modernisation in which it is argued that industry and business have adopted the “efficiency revolution” as a strategy to permit adaptation of industrial production by improving environmental performance (see for example Huber, 2000). This perspective focuses on the best technologies to achieve efficiency, but does not tend to consider the social aspects, that is, people’s responses to the technologies.

In practice, supermarkets are facing considerable opposition to their plans to develop wind turbines. Tesco’s first “eco-store” at Wick in northern Scotland features five small wind turbines on the roof to power the checkout tills, but Tesco has run into difficulties with its proposals elsewhere. Plans for a 11 metre high turbine in the car park of its store in Greenock, Scotland, were withdrawn in January 2008 “at the eleventh hour”, after planners complained of their “harmful visual impact”, and conservationists blamed two 15 metre high turbines at the firm’s store in Barrow, Cumbria, for killing dozens of birds

(Express, 2008). In a submission to the Government's White Paper on planning last year, Tesco called on ministers to ease planning rules, saying it had "encountered some difficulties in rolling out this technology" (Express, 2008).

### ***ASDA and wind power***

In 2006, ASDA announced its intention to power its entire estate of over 345 supermarket stores and distribution depots entirely by renewable energy, with a medium-term goal of reducing the energy requirements of its existing stores and distribution centres across the UK by 20% by 2012 as compared to 2005 (ASDA website). This raised important questions regarding how this might be achieved, and the impact of these proposals upon local communities in the vicinity of the proposed turbines. It may be that a substantial proportion of this renewable energy will be bought through the grid from large renewable energy suppliers. However, the company also intends to install urban wind turbines at several locations as pilots for wider implementation throughout its estate.

As part of its RET strategy, ASDA has recently lodged applications to erect wind turbines at several of its supermarkets. Its Portlethen store in the Aberdeenshire Council area "is one of 317 which have been identified as suitable due to wind speed in the area" (Mearns Leader, 2009). This proposal for two 19 metre high structures has met with opposition, particularly in the light of the store's recent refusal to site a recycling centre within its grounds (Mearns Leader, 2009). The Chairman of the local Community Council commented: "It's a shame they didn't show the same level of support for the environment when we wanted a recycling centre there" (Mearns Leader, 2009). Similarly, ASDA's

proposal for a 18 metre high turbine in the car park of its Kirkcaldy store, which would power half of the store's check-outs, has been controversial, sparking concern among locals about noise pollution from the turbine (Fife Today, 2009).

In addition to proposing wind turbines at some of its supermarkets, ASDA plans to build single, large wind turbines to power six of its distribution centres as a pilot phase<sup>2</sup>, with the longer-term aim being to roll this out to all distribution depots, with each project projected to cost around two million pounds. The first of these planning applications to be submitted were those for the distribution centres in Falkirk in Scotland and just outside Northampton in England. The size of these proposed turbines - 125 metres high from base to blade tip, with a rotor blade diameter of 90 metres – is particularly striking given that the 18 metre high turbine proposed at ASDA's Kirkcaldy store was described by the local media as “massive” (Fife Today, 2008).

This paper is based on a case study carried out in 2008<sup>3</sup> of these two proposals during the planning process and planning outcome stages. ASDA anticipated that construction of these two turbines would begin in early 2008, but, as this paper shows, the process in both projects has been longer and more complex than predicted.

## **Aims and method**

The paper posits that the complexity and length of time taken to reach the planning outcomes in Falkirk and Northampton, and the opposition to the plans,

particularly vociferous in the Northampton case, may be because ASDA followed a consultation process that appeared to be based on an assumption that local people would support the supermarket's environmental efforts, and see the siting of a 125 metre turbine as beneficial to the local area. Yet, these proposals differ from ASDA's usual projects and from usual proposals for wind energy developments in the following ways:

1. Wind energy was a new initiative for a private company, and was framed as the supermarket's response to the global problem of climate change;
2. The developer of the wind turbines, rather than being part of the "wind industry", was a large supermarket already known to the communities around the proposed sites, and this pre-existing relationship would influence, either positively or negatively, local people's perceptions of the proposals;
3. The proposed turbines would produce energy only for use by the supermarket chain itself, rather than to power local homes. Thus, although the proposals were put forward by ASDA as a positive step which should be supported by its customer, there were no clear benefits to the local community;
4. The proposed projects would be sited in urban or semi-urban locations, and would be single, very tall turbines, with the associated visual (and possibly noise) impact on people living close to them. The urban context also made it likely that support for or opposition to the proposals would be localised, as they would only interest people living or working in the vicinity, unlike proposals for rural windfarms which tend to generate interest from further afield.

The paper will explore ASDA's decision to develop wind power at its distribution centres, and investigate the process of public engagement that followed and the responses of the local communities concerned. It will consider why ASDA has decided to pursue wind power, and reflect upon the possible tensions between ASDA's relationship with its customers at the local level and its decision to roll-out a programme of wind energy and the associated impacts, perceived or real. It will use data from the case study to analyse how actors key to the planning process explain or perceive ASDA's decision to develop wind turbines in the two locations, and to explore local residents' perceptions of the proposals by a private sector company with which they have a pre-existing relationship to develop single, very high wind turbines in semi-urban locations close to their homes.

The interview data comes from interviews conducted with local government, commercial and community actors key to the planning process in each case. This included planning officers and the relevant Property Communications Managers for ASDA in each location, as well as local elected members in Falkirk, and in Northampton, a representative of the local Parish Council which acted as the opposition group for the proposal.

The focus groups with local residents were facilitated by the authors of the paper, and each lasted two hours, involving up to ten participants. The facilitators led the discussion to gain insight into participants' perceptions of ASDA's proposals. Local residents in Falkirk affected by the proposed turbine live mainly in social housing, while their Northampton counterparts are from largely affluent villages. In the presentation of the case study findings, focus

group participants are given pseudonyms for the purposes of ensuring anonymity. The location of the focus groups is indicated (Falkirk or Northampton), and in the case of Northampton, “GH” is added for the focus group held in the closest village to the proposed site, Great Houghton, as proximity clearly affected the strength of feeling of many participants.

The next section will give an overview of the planning process in each case, before moving on to analyse the case study findings.

## **The case study of two ASDA distribution centres**

### ***Falkirk Distribution Centre***

In January 2007, ASDA submitted an application to Falkirk Council to erect a single, two megawatt wind turbine, of a height of 125 metres from base to blade tip, at their chilled distribution depot in the Langlees area of Falkirk, which it stated would supply up to 75% of the depot’s energy needs. After submitting the application, the company undertook public engagement, including two public exhibitions to which local residents were invited by letter. Leaflets with feedback forms were available at the exhibitions to allow people to send back their comments. The local paper, the Falkirk Herald, ran an online poll on its website to which 83% of respondents replied in support of the proposal (interview data).

However, despite only two objections from local residents and support from planning officers, the application was rejected by the Planning Committee in December 2007. The main reasons cited for rejection were visual impact of



the turbine's height and scale, failure to demonstrate that wind was the best renewable energy option for the site, and lack of tangible benefits to the community. ASDA appealed the decision, but following discussions with planning officers and elected members, resubmitted the application in June 2008, this time addressing both the lack of provision for community benefits and the concern that alternative technologies had not been fully researched. This time, ASDA proposed community benefits involving a trust fund whereby local organisations would be able to apply to the developer for grants over a 25 year period, funded by a proportion of the revenue generated by the wind turbine<sup>4</sup>.

After resubmitting the planning application, the developer undertook enhanced public engagement, including local media coverage and an additional press release. In addition, an information leaflet was sent to local residents, entitled "Falkirk: Leading the way in renewable energy". Its opening paragraph introduced the proposal as follows:

At ASDA, we aim to make sustainable living affordable for all, and we are fully committed to ensuring that our distribution centres and stores are run as efficiently as possible. By reducing the amount of energy and fuel we consume, we can pass on these savings to deliver the best value products and services to you, our customers.

In its Frequently Asked Questions section, it asked "Are wind turbines noisy?" and gave the following response:

Technical advances in wind turbine design over the last decade have made mechanical noise from turbines almost undetectable. The main sound is the aerodynamic swoosh of the blades passing the tower. However, there are strict guidelines on wind turbine noise to protect local residents. You can stand under a turbine and hold a conversation without raising your voice.

It gave the following reply to “Why wind power?”:

Using the wind to supply power to our distribution centre will enable us to cut harmful carbon emissions. A modern wind turbine will payback the energy used in its manufacture within eight months and produce carbon-free electricity for the remainder of its lifetime.

The resubmitted application was approved by the planning committee in October 2008, from which date the developer hoped to be “up and running in six months” (interview data), although at the time of writing (April 2010), construction of the turbine has still not commenced.

### ***Northampton Distribution Centre***

In early 2007, ASDA began pre-application discussions with West Northampton Development Corporation (WNDC) on a proposal to construct a single, two megawatt wind turbine, of a height of 125 metres from base to blade tip, at their distribution depot in Brackmills industrial estate outside Northampton. According to ASDA, the turbine would generate 100% of the depot’s energy.

At this point, ASDA engaged the local community by sending letters to all residents in the nearby village of Great Houghton, which overlooks the

proposed site, inviting them to a public exhibition. However, it is clear from interview and focus group data that an administrative and communications error occurred which resulted in the letters failing to reach certain sections of the local population. According to the opposition group, the mail shot only included females, while according to ASDA's Property Communications Manager, the error related to missing out those residents who were not on the electoral register (interview data). Yet another version of events came from a focus group participant in Great Houghton, who recalled that "they didn't cover everybody, and in a lot of instances, sent [the letter] to their children, who were already at university ..."

Nevertheless, over 100 letters from the public were received in response to ASDA's letters, the vast majority of which opposed the proposal, mainly on the grounds of visual impact due to the height of the proposed turbine. There were also mixed responses from statutory consultees. Great Houghton Parish Council, acting as the opposition group for the project, managed to delay submission of the planning application by referring to Northampton Borough Council's local plan, in which the recommended maximum height for construction was 25 meters. The application was eventually submitted in January 2008, and included a proposed community benefits package - a fund of £100,000 to which people could apply for renewable energy and insulation, as well as to signpost the local footpath which runs alongside the proposed site.

Although planning officers recommended approval of the proposal, a number of issues were raised by those present at the first planning meeting in June 2008 (interview data). In particular, Great Houghton Parish Council argued

against the proposal on the grounds of safety around the siting of the wind turbine next to a public right of way and commercial buildings, which was contrary to the guidelines in the relevant Planning Policy Statement (PPS 22), (ODPM, 2004). Consequently, WNDC decided to defer the application to consider this point. Satisfied that “there was a strong precedent for this type of development in terms of wind turbine developments that had been approved in a similar urban context in other parts of the country”, WNDC officers took the proposal back to committee, again recommending approval (interview data).

However, at the second planning meeting in July 2008, the issue of health and safety was raised again by Great Houghton Parish Council, and also by The Campaign to Protect Rural England (CPRE). Against the advice of planning officers, the planning committee voted against the proposal, resulting in refusal of the application on the grounds of the risk assessment not covering bird kill and fire. Although the WNDC planning officers warned committee members that the refusal was unsound and that it was unlikely to stand up in a planning appeal, the developer has not yet re-submitted the application. According to ASDA’s Property Communication Manager (interview data), this is in part due to ASDA’s concern about the implications of a wind turbine health and safety incident only 40 miles away near Peterborough (BBC news, 2008). This supports Toke’s (2005) suggestion that the attitude of people living closest to proposed windfarms is the most important influence on the decisions of local authorities. Likewise, it casts doubt on Aitken et al’s (2008) suggestion that local opposition groups’ power over planning outcomes for wind farm developments serves only to delay rather than to actually influence planning outcomes. It also

casts doubt on Osborne Clarke's (2005) suggestion that securing planning permission for green energy in industrial brownfield sites may be easier than in rural contexts.

The paper will now explore the case study findings, starting with perceptions by the key actors interviewed of ASDA's decision to propose wind energy developments at these two sites. This is followed by an analysis of public perceptions of ASDA's reasons or motives for proposing these developments in their localities, and of the planning process, drawing on the results of the focus groups.

## **The case study findings**

### ***ASDA's reasons for proposing wind energy***

The Property Communications Manager for ASDA in Northampton explained the range of considerations behind the selection of the distribution centres chosen for the pilot:

... a key element of achieving that target is to try and get planning permission for these two megawatt wind turbines in a number of our depots that have been assessed as suitable and capable of generating the most renewable energy possible ... They were selected on the basis of the wind regime in those areas and the effectiveness of the proposal: would it deliver those energy savings which would make the investment worthwhile? ... Secondly, we consider the land issues and so on, so we have as smooth a process of delivering the planning application as possible. It makes it much easier if you own the land rather than it

being on a lease ... And then all sorts of other ones, as you can imagine, the main points being around health and safety ... (interview data).

He explained ASDA's proposal for the Northampton distribution centre as an attempt to "green the grid".

In an interview with local newspaper the Northampton Chronicle and Echo (July 2008), he had suggested that the company was proposing such a conspicuous form of renewable energy in order to support the local authority in making public Northamptonshire's commitment to tackling climate change:

ASDA has been working very closely with the local planning officers and the community to construct a proposal offering Northamptonshire the opportunity of creating an iconic statement of its commitment to combat the threats posed by climate change.

This suggests that ASDA's key concern is to make a "statement" about its environmental credentials, and that ASDA is making an assumption that the local community will support them in this. This actor used the same terminology when interviewed for the case study in September 2008, lamenting the refusal by planners to develop "what would have been a really iconic statement of Northampton tackling climate change" and "a fantastic educational facility" (interview data). He felt that most local people had failed to understand the significance of the reduction in carbon emissions which ASDA argued would result from the proposed development:

One of the key things about this development, of course, is that it would have produced enough energy, renewable energy, to operate that depot for 25 years. That is the greatest benefit of all because we are cutting down on our reliance on electricity deriving from fossil fuels. That is a key and ultimate benefit and it's a pity that people know that point and understand it, but ultimately they regard the impact on their view as a greater issue (interview data).

This point highlights the tension between ASDA's corporate environmental strategy and the responses of local people, and demonstrates ASDA's assumption of support from local residents.

ASDA's Property Communications Manager for Scotland explained that wind energy had been proposed for the Falkirk site because it would be the most efficient and cost-effective form of renewable energy and would have the least impact on local residents (interview data). She further explained that a wind turbine had been considered to be the most suitable technology for the industrial landscape around the site:

The area is for industrial business use and in the environmental report, it looks at the wider area and it is thought that the landscape is robust enough to have this wind turbine, because there [are] hills in the background and it's an industrial site ... (interview data).

She explained the proposal for a single tall turbine as opposed to a number of smaller turbines in terms of efficiency, as 163 small-scale turbines would be needed to produce the same amount of energy as the one tall turbine, "which would obviously not be practical at this site" (interview data).

From the interviews conducted with ASDA's Property Communications Managers for the two locations, therefore, ASDA appears to have a somewhat fixed perception of what local people will want, and to be basing its plans on such assumptions. The next section will explore the perceptions of the other actors interviewed of ASDA's motives for the proposals.

### ***Other actors' perceptions of ASDA's motives***

A planning officer in Northampton stated that some members of the public see wind turbines "as contemporary, progressive and so on and making statements about that" (interview data). He agreed with the local newspaper (Northampton Chronicle and Echo, 2008) that the refusal of the application was "a missed opportunity":

There was an opportunity to make a statement here about the future of the town, about being brave in terms of the delivery of sustainable technologies and WNDC had not taken that opportunity (interview data).

He went on to describe the current move by supermarkets to develop renewable energy projects as part of a marketing drive to declare their "green credentials" (interview data).

Interviewed before the unexpected negative outcome of the planning application, a member of Great Houghton Parish Council commented on "the lack of democracy" in the planning process for the project. He felt that planning officers had "de-weighted" certain established policies in order to push through the application in an attempt at "green wash":



... they have weighted their decision and their reporting in favour of national policy and meeting targets and making iconic statements ... So I don't think renewable energy is at the forefront ... it's target meeting and being seen to be green – “green wash” they call it (interview data).

His perception of the planning authority's motives for supporting the application echoes the planning officer's perception of ASDA's motives for proposing the developments.

The next section will explore perception of the actors interviewed (ASDA and other actors) of the public engagement undertaken by ASDA.

### ***Actors' perceptions of the public engagement process***

A planning officer in Northampton felt that ASDA was disadvantaged in terms of its communication with local people about the proposal because it was not the “primary supermarket” in the town. He further felt that ASDA had tried to submit the proposal within too tight a timescale in order to compete with other major supermarkets in the push towards developing wind energy, which had resulted in a lack of engagement prior to submission of the proposal:

The way that corporates work is that ... someone in ASDA said right, we've got to compete with Tesco and Sainsbury's who are making all sorts of claims about their green credentials, what can we do? Okay, let's see if we can stick some wind turbines up or do something ... So I think if you'd have been doing this with a longer-term strategy ... you may well have done things differently. You might have done a staff questionnaire and a customer questionnaire in your store about

how ASDA can contribute towards reducing climate change locally ... (interview data).

He also pointed to a tendency of the public to misunderstand “the relationship and the weighting of policy and the definition of the public interest”.

ASDA’s Property Communications Manager in Northampton explained that he had taken over the public engagement mid-way through the process. He suggested that, had he been in post at the beginning, he would have informed local people earlier about the proposal. In particular, he felt that the company had missed a key opportunity to inform and engage people by making the communications error described above, which he felt had led to ASDA “needlessly creat[ing] opposition out of a lack of understanding about our message and our proposals” (interview data).

His counterpart in Falkirk emphasised the importance of informing local people about the proposal, again basing this on an assumption of the community supporting ASDA’s environmental stance:

... it’s those people that it directly affects, on a day to day basis and we want to be, we want to be a positive aspect of that community ... And we want to have local people who support what we’re doing and you know, building something like a wind turbine is, is something that people can be proud of having in their area, because it’s quite a statement, to say, you know, this is what we’re doing and it’s just got support from the local area (interview data).

The Falkirk proposal coincided with plans for a £49 million environmental development known as the Helix Project, involving the development of

community woodlands, an extension to the canal network, pathways and other community-based initiatives. A local councillor felt that ASDA's turbine could have been proposed within the Helix site, and that not doing so was a "missed opportunity" to make the turbine an accepted and integral feature of the local area (interview data). However, this would not have been straightforward from a land ownership perspective; the proposed site was owned by ASDA and therefore presented no difficulties in this respect.

In the Northampton case study, the "nimby" label was cautiously used by ASDA's Property Communications Manager in relation to some of the objectors to the proposal. When asked by the researcher about the appropriateness of the term to describe the opposition, planning officers there gave the following responses:

I don't know whether I'd like to kind of... whether I would like to go as far as to say that the views that have been expressed are nimbyism. But what I would say is that, from the majority of the responses I've seen, most of the responses start with the phrase, or within the first paragraph of the text, something akin to: we support the idea of renewable energy development but we don't want it in this location ... And I think you could, you know, see that there is a link there between using that sort of phrase and saying, we don't want it in our backyard, in our area (interview data).

Now, it's not for me to say they're nimbys because, you know, they've got an argument that they don't think it should take place in urban areas (interview data).

While the former response captures the common usage of the term “nimbyism”, the latter response offers an alternative explanation for opposition to the proposal, focusing on the urban context.

The next section continues the discussion about perceptions of ASDA’s motives for the proposals, focussing on the concerns of local residents, by drawing on the focus groups. It also explores their perceptions of the effectiveness of ASDA’s communications with the local community.

### ***Local people’s perceptions of the process***

The fact that local people had a pre-existing relationship with the developer - even if they did not shop at ASDA, they were likely to be aware of their existence in the town centre, and of the distribution centre on the fringe of the town - framed their responses in the focus groups. However, rather than local residents displaying loyalty to the developer, this relationship weighted focus group discussions towards concerns about the developer’s motives, and about the benefits from the proposed wind projects being for the developer rather than for local people.

In Falkirk, some focus group participants had assumed that the development would result in cheaper electricity for local people, and were “disappointed” to be informed by the researchers that this would not be the case. Although ASDA’s Property Communications Managers maintained that the savings to the company would be passed on to customers through cheaper product prices, and would also help safeguard local jobs, a common sentiment expressed by focus group participants was that “the turbines are not going to do

anything for us” (Geraldine, Falkirk). However, other participants saw the benefits to ASDA as acceptable: “It’s going to save ASDA money, is good for the environment in the long-term. There’s no real downside to it at all” (George, Falkirk).

In Northampton, some focus group participants perceived that the developer would benefit from the proposed development by gaining publicity from (falsely) projecting itself as a “green” company, “just to basically increase their sales basis” (Frank, Northampton GH). Some saw this as “morally and ethically wrong”:

Isn’t there something morally and ethically wrong with something that says we’re doing this because we can enhance the future of the world, but we’re actually only doing it because we want to make a buck out of it? (Anne). Absolutely (Eric).  
We have to protest on those grounds as well (Doris, Northampton GH).

Others pointed to basic energy-saving exercises which the developer should implement before erecting wind turbines – exercises which would have no impact on the local community, such as switching off the lights in their head office which were “blazing ... 24 hours a day”, and importing less food (Alan, Northampton).

In Falkirk, some participants wanted to know how much of a reduction in carbon emissions would result from the turbine, while others felt this was irrelevant to them since they would not benefit from it:

They should be saying, right, we put out this, that, the other, the turbine's gong to compensate by so much, you know, 2%, 1%, half a per cent, so then it would be an asset (Julie) [General agreement] ... Well to me, even if they did tell you things like that, you're not going to be so interested in the first place because you're not benefiting out of it (Helen). Aye but everybody's interested (Kate, Falkirk).

Only one focus group participant explicitly saw the proposed turbine as a positive feature for the local area:

I think it will probably give a wee bit more of a feel-good factor looking at it, thinking that it's something that's trying to make a difference, do you know what I mean? It will maybe make you feel a wee bit more rural ... (Hilda, Falkirk).

No respondents saw the proposed turbines as potential tourist attractions, although some in Falkirk felt they would be popular with local children.

In both locations, some focus group participants questioned the viability of the schemes, for example whether a single turbine would be effective, whether it would work all the time, and whether there would be enough wind at the sites. Some participants were concerned about cost-effectiveness, while others felt that whether or not the schemes were financially beneficial to the developer was irrelevant to them as individuals: "No, I'm a simple fellow ... it's simply that if they pay for it and they set it up to make money out of it, that's their risk" (David, Northampton GH).

In both locations, there seemed to be little knowledge of any formal community benefits package that ASDA was proposing for the local

communities. A focus group participant in Falkirk questioned whether local people would actually use the community benefits, “apart from the money-off vouchers, or whatever, you know what I mean?” (Isobel, Falkirk).

Focus group participants had much to say about the communication approaches used by ASDA, and the limitations of these, demonstrating that ASDA needed to consider more seriously how to engage with local people, given that these proposals differed from ASDA’s usual proposals. Some participants expressed concern about the nature of the information being imparted from developers and local government and how they could make judgements as to whether this was factually correct and impartial. This included information relating to viability and the benefits of the project. The need for “balanced”, “complete”, “trustworthy” and “objective” information was discussed at length by focus group participants in Great Houghton. Some referred to the lack of “objective evaluation[s]” at the public meetings they had attended, which was why they felt the proposal had received so much local opposition:

So in principle, the fact that the developer managed it so badly is what has failed them to get it through, not the fact that it was a 125 metre wind turbine ... I didn’t feel I had enough information to make an informed decision, therefore living in the village, I had to take the risk-averse view, which is best to block it (David, Northampton GH).

Others spoke of the difficulty of knowing which information is trustworthy when researching wind power on the Internet.

Falkirk focus group participants had formed generally positive views of wind power through television, seeing wind farms in other locations, conversations with friends who live near other wind turbines, seeing turbines being transported on the back of lorries, and the press. However, they were unsure about the potential noise impact of the proposed turbine. This concern about noise was framed by the issue of traffic noise from the distribution centre, due to recent site clearance of a building that had previously acted as a noise barrier, which local councillors felt needed to be resolved before the turbine development went ahead (interview data). This demonstrates the importance of the developer's pre-existing relationship with the local community to the latter's acceptance of the specific proposal. Other factors in local residents' pre-existing relationship with ASDA were some positive views of the company's contribution to the local community through local schools for example, while others were critical of their local ASDA store.

Although there were concerns about the scale of the turbine in Falkirk, focus group participants were not concerned about the visual impact on the landscape, since "it's not exactly a scenic area along there anyway" (George, Falkirk). One focus group participant (Irene) had concerns about the safety of wind turbines, while in the Northampton focus groups, safety was a major focus of discussion since it had been such a crucial issue during the planning process. Safety concerns among participants ranged from rotor blades disengaging to mechanical failings (Bill, Northampton), but the main concern was that the turbine would be in "a populated area" (Craig, Northampton GH).



In Falkirk, a number of people felt that there had been “no information” or “miscommunication” from the developer and from the local council:

They've not had the right kind of PR people in thinking about it (Hilda). Maybe the council thought everybody was going to kick up about it (Gail). Or again, did they want to hide it from everybody? (Jack) ... And the next thing it's there, and they haven't told anybody (Hilda, Falkirk).

In both locations, participants felt that sending out leaflets or letters in the mail, addressed “to the occupier”, had been a completely ineffective means of communicating with local people, with some having never actually seen the leaflets, as they were likely to have got lost in among “junk mail” and “chucked ... in the bin” (Gail, Falkirk). Those in Falkirk who had read the leaflet made negative comments on its content and presentation:

It wasn't an informative leaflet [General agreement] ... It didn't actually catch your interest ... It wasn't very informative, it was just telling you what they were planning to do it and there wasn't a lot you could do about it anyway (Helen, Falkirk).

Falkirk respondents also referred to ASDA's decision to hold their public exhibition at the community centre on the local community's gala day. This had baffled them, particularly as the exhibition was held indoors (and upstairs) while the gala activity was taking place outdoors in the community centre grounds. Others were critical of the days and times chosen to hold the exhibitions. Those who were very active in the community were particularly critical of the

developer's communication, as they themselves had not known in advance about the exhibitions.

In Falkirk, suggestions by focus group participants for improved public engagement included: displaying a scale model of the turbine; holding an open day, possibly in the local school; sending out official letters addressed to individuals; a representative of the developer calling on local residences to explain the proposal in person; holding an exhibition on gala day that was properly integrated with the gala event; and posters displayed in the local school.

In both locations, some focus group participants saw ASDA as a major supermarket "giant" which would be very influential in its dealings with local authorities and thus in the planning process: "They've got the proposal, they were watertight, they were ASDA, a multi-million pound corporation, we're going to walk this" (Andrew, Northampton GH). Another participant suggested that the developer may have offered "sweeteners" to the local planning authority in order to push through the planning application (Barbara, Northampton). Such pre-conceived opinions of the developer clearly shaped local people's perceptions of the public engagement process and of the proposals themselves.

## **Conclusions**

The case study supports Wolsink's (2007) suggestions that public attitudes toward wind power generally are fundamentally different from those towards

specific wind farms, and that poor communication plays a part in obstructing the implementation of wind turbine schemes. Urban or semi-urban, private sector, small-scale developments such as the two cases explored in this paper provide new insights into public engagement with RETs.

The paper earlier posited four ways in which the proposals under discussion could be viewed as different from ASDA's usual projects, and also different from the usual proposals for wind energy developments.

The first point was that the proposed developments were a new initiative for a private company, and were framed as the supermarket's response to the global problem of climate change. The case study shows that RET probably demands a very different set of sensitivities and understandings than ASDA's usual proposals, in order to secure effective public engagement.

The second point was that the developer of the wind turbines, rather than being part of the "wind industry", was a large supermarket already known to the communities around the proposed sites, and this pre-existing relationship could influence, either positively or negatively, local people's perceptions of the proposals. The case study highlights the way in which apparently unrelated issues may significantly influence the objection discourse, such as longstanding concerns over the issue of traffic noise from the Falkirk distribution centre which had created some opposition to ASDA's operations in the local area.

The third point was that the proposed turbines would produce energy only for use by the company itself, rather than to power local homes, so, although the proposals were put forward by ASDA as a positive step which should be supported by its customers, there were no clear benefits to the local

community. The somewhat vague, although nevertheless emotively powerful concept of “community benefits” is clearly an important element that helps frame public responses to wind energy developments. In the two cases considered here, there is little evidence of significant community benefit. Apart from the developer’s commitment to an environmental trust fund, there are no obvious employment opportunities, cheaper food or electricity which might be regarded as immediate community benefits. The principal beneficiary would be the developer, and, presumably, the global environment. This is a key issue in that both the developer and planners appeared to incorrectly assume public support because of the schemes’ supposed environmental benefits – environmental in the global rather than the local sense.

This brings us to the question of why ASDA is developing wind turbines. In the case study, while ASDA Communications Managers explained ASDA’s motives in terms of its responsibility to contribute to climate change mitigation, the results of the focus groups show that local residents were most likely to see the company’s motives in terms of “greenwash” and maximising its profits. The proposals will clearly help ASDA to maximise its profits from its urban land holdings, and the supermarket may have gained more credibility from local residents by emphasising this benefit over CSR claims: if CSR was indeed the motivation behind ASDA’s proposals, it was CSR at a global or societal level, rather than community-focussed.

The fourth point was that the proposed wind turbines would be in urban or semi-urban locations, and would be single, very tall turbines, with the associated impacts on local people. The urban context also made it likely that

support for or opposition to the proposals would be localised. There may be support for wind energy in principle, but the objection discourse in the cases under consideration was largely conditioned by concerns over safety and visual impact in urban areas (Northampton), plus the reaction to a large supermarket chain wishing to locate large wind turbines in a locality for its own financial benefits with little clear benefit to the communities. The ASDA case study thus suggests that the actions of supermarkets in terms of installing wind turbines (both small-scale turbines and the large turbines that ASDA proposes) has not yet furthered the cause of and support for this form of RET in urban locations.

Although in Northampton the “nimby” label was applied by the developer to some objectors, it seems that other issues were of equal or greater importance in the “objection discourse”. It is also clear that the strategies adopted by the developer were inadequate to deal with genuine local concerns and objections. In particular, they failed to understand that these wind developments were qualitatively different from other urban developments that the supermarket had been involved with.

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## Notes

1 Community benefits have also been referred to as “goodwill payments” (Miner, 2009: 537).

2 Other distribution depots involved in this pilot are at Teesport and Wakefield, both in Yorkshire.

3 ESRC grant reference RES-152-25-1008, “Beyond Nimbyism: a multidisciplinary investigation of public engagement with renewable energy technologies”, 1<sup>st</sup> January 2006 – 31<sup>st</sup> May 2009 (case studies conducted between April and November 2008). The project was part of the TSEC Towards a Sustainable Energy Economy, a cross-disciplinary fund administered by the ESRC.

4 This was subsequently set at £100,000 over a ten year period.

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